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ABSTRACT

This document discusses the problems and prospects of developing an open classroom based on an actual experience. The document is divided into sections of preservice concerns and in-service development. The former treats such topics as open education readings; school visitations, needed facilities; and planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating the open education process. Under in-service development, the following topics are discussed: preplanning activities (which include communicating the idea itself to school administrators, teachers, parents, and concerned citizens); organizational activities; the implementation sequence; and prospects for the future. In the organizational activities section, four organizational tasks are defined: organizing materials into "learning centers," organizing the structural arrangement of sequentially introducing children to a more flexible and open classroom, organizing the gradual movement of children from a large-group structure to a more open structure, and organizing a setting for keeping school staff and community people informed on the success of the entire endeavor. In the particular experience of the authors, implementation problems took place in three basic areas: teacher behaviors, child behaviors, and curriculum modification. (JA)

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PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS IN DEVELOPING AN OPEN CLASSROOM

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Teacher educators often spend elaborate amounts of time and money in developing models for the training of teachers to accomplish specific tasks. Educating teachers for developing open classrooms has already initiated a variety of 'concept models.' Such models offer starting points for pre-service and in-service teachers. Yet 'models' are usually lacking in any in-depth explanation of the problems and prospects of actually planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating for open learning environments. This paper will be directed toward a view of the problems and prospects of developing an open classroom from the perspective of actually enacting such a classroom.

PRE-SERVICE CONCERNS

The authors, in developing some base for the task of developing a open classroom, versed themselves in four areas; (1) literature related to the conceptual, organizational, and evaluative aspects of open classrooms, (2) classrooms and communities approximating the implementation of humane learning approaches, (3) needed facilities to actualize an open classroom, and (4) materials which focus on the planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating of open classrooms.

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Open Education Readings. An extensive examination of the literature on open education revealed a variety of important theoretical and practical concerns requisite to the development of a sound open learning environment. The literature stressed the need for pre-planning, adaptation of ideas to specific school-community environments, preparation of teachers, children, administrative people, and parents for such a learning arrangement; organization of the classroom for flexible learning programs, implementation and evaluation strategies for open classrooms, and the need for sequential development of such learning arrangements.

School Visitations. Following an examination of the literature the authors immersed themselves in a variety of school-community settings. This involvement included a look at traditional school settings, (self contained, graded, and/or content oriented schools), more flexible school programs (non-graded, departmentalized, team teaching and content-process oriented schools), and totally open schools (free schools, infant schools, and process oriented schools).

Such visitations revealed four significant points; (1) the cultural setting of the school often determined the READINESS and POTENTIAL for developing open classrooms, (2) the administrative team can either promote or stifle movements toward opening up classrooms, (3) the preparation and willingness of classroom teacher. toward open learning milieus is a vital link to the entire process, and (4) the family setting of the children can help or hinder movements toward open schooling.

Needed Facilities. While surveying the literature and visiting schools which were utilizing the open education program the authors began developing a list of needed facilities. Such an endeavor was indeed insightful and helpful in gaining a perspective on what facility changes are needed if an open classroom is to become operable.

For example, small tables, manipulative objects, variation in reference materials, interesting 'life' materials, and a myriad of other learning materials which involve children with life take the place of the need for desks, textbook series, workbooks, and the usual such material. Indeed textbooks and workbooks are used --- but in different forms and in different ways than is usually viewed in the traditional classroom.

It is important (as we read and saw the mistakes of others and the success of others) to plan, in the pre-service program, for the kinds of materials needed to implement open classrooms. Combinations of traditional materials and more innovative materials can be an initial point of departure from where you are toward more flexible schools.

Planning, Organizing, Implementing, Evaluating. A culminating pre-service activity revolved around an examination of planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluating the open education process. This activity included an analysis of how others planned, what types of organizational sequences were utilized in moving toward a more open concept of schooling, and what form of implementation and evaluation were used in enacting flexible learning programs and assessing the same.

Indeed the pre-service education of teachers can initiate or stifle the neophytes desire and skill to develop and carry out the process of making school a more open, human, and functional place for children. The pre-service education of teachers for more open classrooms should contain the sequential components of intense reading on conceptual and practical material on open education, visitation and observation of schools and classrooms that have or approximate the open classroom concept, examination of needed facilities and equipment for making the open classroom functional, and an analysis of the planning, organizing, implementing, and evaluative processes which are most effective in developing an open classroom.

IN-SERVICE DEVELOPMENT

The above components were the main pre-service activities in which the authors were involved. The following section of this paper explores the in-service procedures the authors utilized in developing an open first grade classroom. The discussion includes an overview of (1) pre-planning activities, (2) organizational activities, (3) implementation sequence steps, and (4) utilization of evaluation and feedback for re-directing the program where needed.

Pre-Planning Activities. Pre-Planning activities included communicating the idea itself to school administrators, parents, and concerned citizens. As acceptance of the ideas was gained, further in-depth communication to the teachers and parents of the specific school-community setting was undertaken. These communications took

the form of group meetings, letters and visits with parents and individual discussions with building teachers. After a conducive environment was established pre-planning of needed materials, facilities, and equipment was initiated.

In pre-assessing for needed materials and equipment several criteria were established. Some of these criteria were; (1) available financial resources, (2) available non-financial resources, (3) kinds of materials essential for developing an open classroom, (4) kinds of materials highly desirable to operating an open classroom, (5) types of equipment and facilities essential for operating an open classroom, and (6) needed materials for making the transition from a lock-step curriculum to a more open classroom. It was surprising that a variety of materials were already available but previously not utilized for flexible program development. Such things as individualized learning kits, independent study modules, role playing scenes and accompanying materials, learning simulation games, dramatic materials, puppetry, diverse reading materials, and a variety of other items were already within the school --- but too often being used simply as support materials rather than as multi-directional ways for children to learn. Indeed new types of facilities (development of animal center, cushions for a reading center), and materials (self operative film strips, math kits, etc.) were acquired or built; yet the thrust of materials were available --- BUT NEEDED REORGANIZING AND REDEVELOPING.

After developing a materials list and initiating direction toward more functional use of already existing materials the task of developing an organizational plan for implementation in the fall of 1971 was initiated.

Organizational Activities. Four organizational tasks were defined; organizing materials into 'learning centers,' organizing the structural arrangement of sequentially introducing the children to a more flexible and open type of classroom, organizing the movement of children from a large group structure (gradually) to a more open structure, and organizing a setting for keeping school staff and community people informed on the success of the entire endeavor. Each of these tasks was thoroughly worked through and only tentative guidelines developed --- thus leaving room for changes in organization as the need developed.

Several learning centers were planned in advance and each was to be introduced gradually; allowing time for internalizing each step of the process. Centers were planned in the following areas; library corner, reading center, math center, painting center, gaming center, kitchen area, role playing corner, and social learning center. Needed materials and equipment for each center was outlined and a center renewal system established so that each center would consistently contain diverse materials to meet the growth levels of the children as they progressed through the school year.

Although no definite time limits were set on organizational sequence was outlined for introducing the children to a different and more flexible type of learning environment. For example, it was decided to begin the school year with the familiar large group instructional process. This arrangement would be maintained for approximately one month --- allowing for usual beginning of the school year adjustments by teacher and children.

Then as the teacher decided that everyone was established as much as possible a library corner would be introduced into the classroom environment. This corner would contain reading materials for the children that they could utilize in or out of the center. No more than three children could utilize this corner at one time and it could be utilized only after basic assignments were completed. This was the type of organizational approach utilized. Later in this paper (Implementation Stages) the entire first year process is described.

Another organizational task was to develop some basic guidelines of movement and direction of movement for the children in becoming familiar with a more open system of learning. Thus limits or quotas were placed on the individual learning centers and time spans were developed for opening and closing centers. In addition the children were trained on how to utilize equipment in the centers. Children would also be informed on what materials were in the centers and were strongly encouraged to bring new materials or to make suggestions for including new ideas and materials in the different learning centers. These organizational problems were thought out and planned for in advance of implementing the program.

Finally some arrangements were developed for keeping school and community personnel informed on the process of developing this type of classroom. Indeed feedback devices were developed via grade level meetings of teachers, parent meetings, and administrative meetings. Local news coverage also was utilized to inform the public on both the successes and failures of the initial movement to open up education. Parent involvement practices such as utilizing

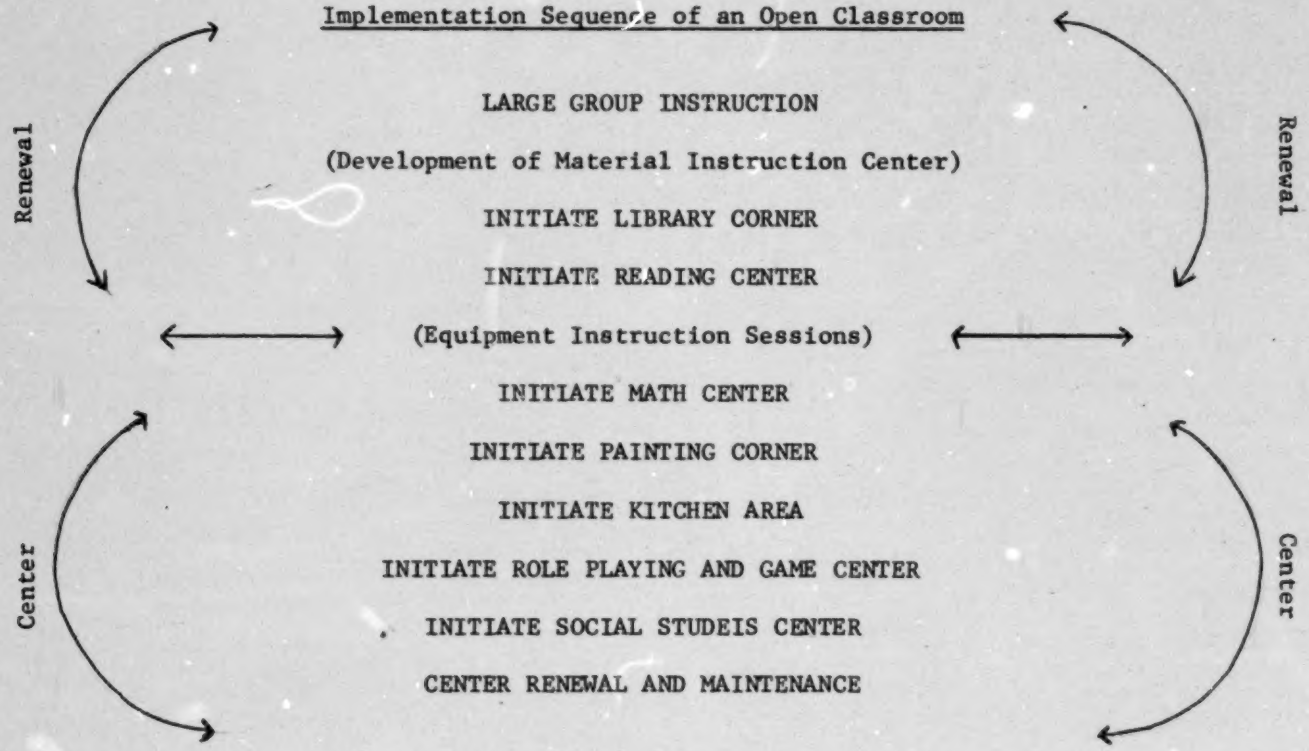
parent aides in the classroom for clerical and related tasks were pre-planned.

All of these organizational tasks were very important in developing a framework for implementation of the open classroom concept. Without such organization and planning the theoretical program would have been very difficult to make into a reality. The following section of this paper briefly describes some of the implementation stages followed in actually developing an open classroom.

Implementation Sequence. The implementation of this open classroom followed the steps as put forth in the following Diagram A. Each step was introduced into the learning environment when the teacher and children and related materials were prepared for utilizing the new center to a maximum degree.

Diagram A

Implementation Sequence of an Open Classroom



The sequence presented in Diagram A provides an overview of the steps followed to implement and introduce each center in the classroom. The rationale for utilizing this sequence, some of the problems confronted in actually implementing the sequence, and potential prospects for expanding this approach to developing an open classroom are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Rationale For Sequence Steps. Some of the basic reasons for utilizing the sequences outlined in Diagram A were as follows: (1) Learning does take place in sequences and can best be accomodated by planned introduction of new materials and new behavior arrangements in sequences. (2) Learning for transfer can best be accomodated by introducing new but related centers of interest most closely allied to the present status of the learner. (3) In order to internalize learnings time must be allowed for the learner to integrate his new knowledges and perspectives with his life space context.

Thus initially the movement from large group instruction toward more flexible learning arrangements was gradually undertaken by beginning with quiet areas such as a library corner and a reading center and only then moving toward more activity oriented centers such as art, role playing, and social interaction centers. This kind of arrangement gradually introduced the child and teacher to new settings which were not totally foreign to them --- thus reducing the total system shock for all involved in the classroom and for those in the related school-community setting.

In this same perspective each center was introduced on a tentative time schedule; allowing time for all involved to internalize the new center before moving on to even newer types of learning center. This kind of arrangement was helpful in developing a setting in which children were comfortalbe with the environment and had a chance to reorganize their perceptual sets.

Problems of Implementation. In the particular experience of the authors implementation problems took place in three basic areas; teacher behaviors, child behaviors, and curriculum modifications. Indeed all three areas take place simultaneously and yet individual problems were dealt with in special sessions.

Teacher behavior problems revolved around the adjustments necessary in moving toward a new kind of learning environment. A sense of identity evolved, not without some tense moments, which began to ask why, how, when, and what kinds of things do need to be done in order to make this work. Different kinds of behaviors were needed than under the old arrangement. Information dissemination became sumsumed to management, organization, intervention, guidance, and a myriad of other flexible classroom behaviors.

The children experience a similar kind of thing where they too needed to reorganize their perceptual orientation of the teacher and a behavioral orientation of how they were to perform in the classroom. Whereas the typical sitting, listening, writing, and rigid kinds of behaviors worked well in the closed classroom, a new set of behaviors (acting, responding, doing, thinking, questioning, self-planning, etc.) were required in the open setting.

It should be pointed out that the planned, gradual development of the program helped in easing behavior change in the new setting.

Curriculum problems surface as the development of a more individual and small group process emerged in the classroom. The need for further re-development of learning centers became very evident in the later part of the year. The need for different kinds of materials also surfaced. Even with a great deal of pre-planning the need for curriculum modification can be expected when moving toward more flexible learning programs.

One can plan for sessions dealing with teacher change, child change, and curriculum change when moving toward more informal and open classrooms. Indeed it would be helpful to build into the program room for growth via human relations and curriculum planning sessions where these problems can be dealt with effectively.

Prospects for the Future. As the year proceeded several areas of open classroom development became evident as future potential. The authors believe their experience may be of benefit to others. For example a CENTER RENEWAL SYSTEM emerged as a viable on-going process during the first year. Expansion of the kinds of centers also emerged for meeting the individual needs of children. Another prospect for the future was the variety of ways of guiding children in their self-study of various learning areas. These and others are areas of the open classroom concept emerged as future prospects.

The pre-and-in-service education of teachers for more open classrooms can be of valuable worth to public schools and to universities and colleges concerned with this topic. An effective way to accomplish this is, we think, outlined and described in this paper.